

Abstract ID : 55

Title : Fishermen as co-researchers: habitat use and conservation of the Amazonian manatee (*Trichechus inunguis*) in Colombia

Category : Conservation

Student : Not Applicable

Preferred Format : Poster Presentation

Abstract : In early 2002 the Amazonian manatee Airuwe was released in a lake near Puerto Nariño, Colombia. Four fishermen tracked Airuwe for 4 months using VHF equipment, then lost contact. The fishermen continued as co-researchers and applied their observational skills and local knowledge to monitoring manatee habitat use as part of the overall aim to protect the species. Information on manatee sightings, feeding areas, hunting events and feces was collected from mid 2002 to mid 2003, with the four co-researchers forming the core of a fishermen's network covering more than 10 communities. A researcher and co-researcher also made observations on manatee behavior from a canoe. Information was analyzed regularly in workshops.

The number of confirmed sightings over 12 months totaled 215 (repeat sightings of an individual on the same day not included). 61% of sightings were made in the Amazon River, 25% in open lakes and 14% in overgrown lakes and flooded forest. There were no sightings in the river during peak high water months and none in overgrown lakes during low water. The high percentage of sightings in the main river partly reflects the effort devoted to observing manatees in an Amazon backwater during low water. The estimated number of manatees using this backwater varied from one to 8 individuals per day and the maximum number of sightings for one day was 80 (repeat sightings included). During the year 6 hunting events were recorded and 7 feces samples collected. Co-researchers also identified manatee feeding on many plant species other than the coarse grasses registered in previous surveys.

Working with fishermen co-researchers made it possible to collect a wealth of data and to ensure that local communities were kept informed about manatees. The co-researchers took part in educational campaigns and helped train fishermen in other areas, extending conservation values.